

Delinquent Behavior of Youth in DCFS Care: Findings from the 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study

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Several studies nationally and in Illinois have found that children in out-of-home care are at increased risk for delinquency. A 2004 study of Illinois adolescents leaving foster care found that over half had a history of arrest, almost one-quarter reported being convicted of a crime, and one-third had spent the night in a correctional facility.ⁱ A study of adolescents in the 1990s in Cook County, Illinois found that a delinquency petition was filed in court during a one-year period for 23% of boys in out-of-home care and 8% of girls, significantly higher percentages than for maltreated children who had not been placed in out-of-home care.ⁱⁱ

The most relevant statistic for this brief concerns youths' self-reports of whether they have committed delinquent acts. Several studies have asked youth questions about delinquency using the Modified Self-Report of Delinquency, a frequently used measure in research on delinquency.ⁱⁱⁱ An Illinois study found that over 52% of foster youth over the age of 11 in 2005 reported committing at least one delinquent act in the past 6 months.^{iv} A national study of children and youth newly placed in out-of-home care in 2008-2009 found that about 34% of youth aged 11 to 17 had committed a status offense in the previous six months.^v

Children in out-of-home care are at greater risk for delinquency given their life experience. Most children and youth in out-of-home care through child protective services have experienced child abuse and/or neglect.^{vi} Children who have been maltreated are at increased risk of delinquency.^{vii} Many children who have been abused and neglected have also experienced such adverse experiences as parental substance abuse, mental health problems, and domestic violence,^{viii} which can also increase the risk for behavioral problems. Moreover, placement in out-of-home care has a disruptive effect on children's lives, particularly when children must move between multiple placements, and placement instability is associated with greater risk of delinquency.^{ix} Delinquent behaviors are both harmful to others and place the youth committing them at risk. Understanding the frequency for delinquent behaviors among youth in out-of-home care is therefore an important part of monitoring their well-being.

Until the 2017 Illinois Study of Child Well-Being, there had been no data for a decade on delinquency among Illinois children in out-of-home care. This brief uses data from the 2017 Illinois study of Child Well-Being to examine the frequency of delinquent behaviors among Illinois youth in out-of-home care. The sample sizes are not large, but the study still yields useful information about the risk to these youth.

2017 Illinois Study of Child Well-Being

The 2017 Illinois Study of Child Well-Being is a study of the well-being of children and youths in the care of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in 2017. The study sampled 700 children who were listed as in care in DCFS' SACWIS client information system on October 23, 2017, and interviewed caseworkers, caregivers and children themselves (age seven and older). Using the Modified Self-Report of Delinquency, eighty one youth aged 11 to 17 self-reported on delinquent behaviors they had engaged in during the past six months. Frequencies are reported below as well as a comparison between younger and older adolescents. Because the sample size was small, we did not compare youth by placement setting. For more information, see the full report of the study (cited below).

Results on Delinquency

Table 1 shows results for the most common delinquent behaviors. Overall 40.3% of these youth reported engaging in at least one delinquent act in the last six months. The most common delinquent behaviors were being unruly in public, carrying a hidden weapon, destroying others' property on purpose, or avoiding paying for things. Most of the youth who reported being unruly in public or carrying a concealed weapon stated doing so three times or more in the past six months. Older adolescents were significantly more likely than younger adolescents to engage in any delinquent behavior: 66.7% of youth aged 15 to 17 had engaged in at least one delinquent act in the previous six months, compared to 24.5% of youth aged to 11 to 14.

Discussion

More than four out of ten adolescents in out-of-home care through Illinois DCFS had engaged in a delinquent act in the previous six months. This proportion increased to two-thirds when we focused on older adolescents aged 15 to 17. This encompassed a variety of different problematic behaviors.

The rate of delinquent behavior in this study (40.3%) is lower than the 52% found in a 2005 study of Illinois youth in out-of-home care, but close to the 34% found in 2008-2009 in a national study. The lower rate in this study compared to that in 2005 in Illinois might relate to declining rates of juvenile crime nationally,^x or may, to some degree, represent statistical variation related to the relatively small sample size.

The small sample size in this study means that conclusions drawn from these data must be tentative, particularly regarding specific delinquent acts. More research is needed to assess the severity of delinquency among these youth. Notice that the individual delinquent acts on the Modified Self-Report of Delinquency differ in severity—being unruly in public seems much less severe than selling hard drugs, for example. Nevertheless, these results suggest that there is an ongoing need to monitor these youth's behavior and take steps to prevent delinquency.

Table 1. Youth Age 11 to 17 Self-Report of Delinquent Behavior in the Past 6 Months (N=81)

	At least once in the past six months		3 times or more in the past six months	
	f	%/ se	f	%/ se
Unruly in public	11	13.6 (3.8)	6	7.3 (2.9)
Carried a hidden weapon	10	12.6 (3.7)	7	8.7 (3.1)
Destroyed others property on purpose	10	12.5 (3.7)	3	3.3 (2.0)
Avoided paying for things	9	11.7 (3.6)	6	6.9 (2.8)
Took things from store without paying	7	8.2 (3.1)	6	6.9 (2.8)
Sold marijuana	6	7.7 (3.0)	2	2.7 (1.8)
Been paid for sex	6	7.2 (2.9)	4	4.8 (2.4)
Been arrested for non-minor offense	5	6.7 (2.8)	2	2.9 (1.9)
Sold hard drugs	4	4.5 (2.3)	4	4.5 (2.3)
Taken something not yours from a car	4	4.4 (2.3)	2	2.9 (1.9)
Number of delinquent acts in the past six months				
Zero	48	59.7		
One to three	18	22.2		
Four or more	15	18.1		

Note. All analyses used weighted data. The sample sizes presented are unweighted. The following were reported by <4% of the sample: Panhandled, Stole from building, Drunk in public, Snatched someone’s purse/ wallet, Stole car/ motorcycle, Been in a gang fight, Threatened people for money/ things, Illegally hitchhiked, Set fire to property on purpose.

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ⁱ Courtney, M., Terao, T., & Best, N. (2004). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Conditions of youth preparing to leave state care-Illinois*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall Center for Children.

ⁱⁱ Ryan, J. P., & Testa, M. F. (2005). Child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency: Investigating the role of placement and placement instability. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27(3), 227–249.

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^{iv} Bruhn, C., Helton, J., Cross, T.P., Shumow, L. & Testa, M. (2008) Well-being. In Rolock, N. & Testa, M. (Eds.) *Conditions of children in or at risk of foster care in Illinois 2007: An assessment of their safety, stability, continuity, permanence, and well-being*. Children and Family Research Center, School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center.

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^v Casanueva, C., Ringeisen, H., Wilson, E., Smith, K., & Dolan, M. (2011). *NSCAW II Baseline Report: Child Well-Being*. OPRE Report #2011-27b, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Estimate calculated from Exhibit 31 on page 49. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nscaw2_child_2.pdf

^{vi} See, e.g., Casanueva, C., Smith, K., Dolan, M., & Ringeisen, H. (2011). *NSCAW II Baseline Report: Maltreatment*. OPRE Report #2011-27c, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nscaw2_maltreatment.pdf, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families (2001). *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: One Year in Foster Care Report*. Washington, D.C. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/oyfc_report.pdf

^{vii} See, e.g., Kelley, B.T., Thornberry, T. P., & Smith, C.A. (1997, August). In the wake of child maltreatment, *OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, pp. 1-16. Stewert, A., Dennson, S., & Waterson, E. (2002). *Pathways from child maltreatment to juvenile offending*. Criminology Research Council, Final Report. Widom, C. S. (2003).

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^{viii} See, e.g., De Bellis, M. D., Broussard, E. R., Herring, D. J., Wexler, S., Moritz, G., & Benitez, J. G. (2001). Psychiatric co-morbidity in caregivers and children involved in maltreatment: A pilot research study with policy implications. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 25, 923-944. Edleson, J. L. (1999). The overlap between child maltreatment and woman battering. *Violence Against Women*, 5, 134–154. Merritt, D. (2009). Child abuse potential: Correlates with child maltreatment rates and structural measures of neighborhoods. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31, 927–934.

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^x See Puzanchera, C. (June 2020). *Juvenile Arrests, 2018*. Juvenile Justice Statistics, National Report Series Bulletin. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

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